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FM AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7988
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 2226
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KUALA LUMPUR 002147

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/20/2016

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SUBJECT: 2006 UMNO GENERAL ASSEMBLY: ABDULLAH OVER MAHATHIR

REF: KUALA LUMPUR 1779

Classified By: Political Section Chief Mark D. Clark for
reasons 1.4 (b, d).

1. (C) Summary: The United Malays National Organization's (UMNO) General Assembly marked Prime Minister's Abdullah consolidation of power with Mahathir avoids the dance

2. (C) Less than a week before the convocation of the UMNO General Assembly, former prime minister Mahathir Mohamed admitted himself to the Ne

3. (SBU) A survivor of heart bypass surgery in 1989, Mahathir's "faulty ticker" created an unassailable and face-saving excuse not to attend t
"I am not a one-term prime minister"

4. (SBU) In the run-up to the assembly, Abdullah gave an exclusive interview to an UMNO-linked newspaper, Utusan Malaysia, which headlined Abc
Najib sets the tone for the assembly

5. (U) Opening the early sessions of the General Assembly for UMNO Wanita (Women), Puteri (Young Women) and Pemuda (Youth), Deputy Prime Minis
Building a cult of personality

6. (C) In what one prominent news paper editor privately called "the beginning of his own cult of personality," Abdullah orchestrated his entrance into the grand assembly hall as a prophet coming to address his people. As Abdullah entered the hall, the audience began singing a well-known Muslim hymn commemorating the Prophet Mohammed's entrance into Medina. Privately, local journalists and some Middle-eastern diplomats were astonished and somewhat offended that Abdullah would equate himself with the Prophet, though newspapers failed to report his entrance procession.

7. (C) Equally telling were the verses Abdullah had recited from the Holy Quran before delivering his key-note address. The readings were from Surah 49. Al-Hujurat, verses 6 - 13, and carried a clear message that UMNO attendees should reject Mahathir and embrace Abdullah. "O you who believe! If an evil person comes to you with any news, verify it, lest you should harm people in ignorance. . . And if two parties among the believers fall to fighting, then make peace between them both. But if one of the outrages against the other, then fight you all against the one which outrages till it complies with the command of Allah. . . Let not a group scoff at another group, it may be that the latter are better than the former. . . Nor defame one another, nor insult one another by nicknames. . . How bad is it to insult one's brother after having faith. And whosoever does not repent, then such are indeed the wrong-doers." The readings from the Holy Quran lasted nearly 20 minutes, and it was commonly heard uttered among visitors and the media that not even PAS (Malaysia's conservative Islamic opposition party) read that many verses at their annual meeting or dared compare their leader with the Prophet.

Abdullah wishes Mahathir a speedy recovery

8. (SBU) The subtle use of the Quranic verses aside, press reports all applauded Abdullah for "avoiding any mention" of Mahathir. Many had expected Abdullah to launch a few veiled salvos at Mahathir, but what they heard were the soft words of their Prime Minister urging the attendees to "pray to the Almighty so that Tun Dr. Mahathir has a speedy recovery. Let us also pray that Tun Dr. Siti Hasmah (Mahathir's wife) and members of her family be given the strength and patience to see through this difficult period."

The son carries on the fight

9. (C) Just the day before Abdullah's speech, Mahathir had received a long ovation from the UMNO Youth delegates when it was mentioned he had that day returned home from the hospital. Moreover, Mahathir's absence did not ensure the assembly avoided the fracas he had long ago begun. Standing in as his father's proxy, Mukhriz Mahathir was quick to criticize Abdullah's performance. Echoing what many others mumbled but no others dared utter, Mukhriz called Abdullah's key-note address disappointing. "I think it's an address he delivered last year. I was hoping for something new. Perhaps he has other ideas," Mukhriz told reporters. (Abdullah's keynote speech will be reported septel.)

10. (C) Mukhriz's comments brought quick rebukes from UMNO Youth President Hishamuddin Tun Hussein and threats that Mukhriz risked being expelled from the UMNO Youth Executive Committee. However, no one took the threats seriously, and many continue to speculate that the 42 year old Mukhriz will run for one of the 25 positions on the UMNO Executive Committee during the next election cycle, guaranteeing his name will remain in the lime-light, and ensuring his father's issues with Abdullah do not merely fade away.

Comment

11. (C) The UMNO General Assembly demonstrated Abdullah's consolidation of his party power base and signified defeat

for Mahathir's attempt to bring Abdullah's leadership to an early end. Abdullah made it clear that pretenders would not be welcome if they tried to unseat him before he was ready to step down, and DPM Najib responded dutifully as the head cheerleader. Mahathir's absence from the assembly was convenient, if not well planned, and prevented any rumors or threats of a division within Malaysia's dominant political party. Mahathir's criticisms of the current administration will not quickly fade away, and will still attract tremendous interest from the public at large, but it is apparent they will have less traction after Abdullah's successful defense and consolidation of his own authority as leader of Malaysia's dominant political party.

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